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ABSTRACT

Part of a larger study examining family involvement in children's special education programs, this study looked at the involvement of 9 fathers in the special education programs of their children (ages 5 to 16). Individual interviews and focus groups were employed to gather data. Three main themes emerged from analysis of interview and focus group data: (1) communication with the school; (2) fathers' views about the role of the parent in the educational process; and (3) fathers' level of satisfaction with the school and school practices. The fathers indicated that they did not receive the communication from the school or the child's teacher that they needed. They also believed that parent involvement is important and identified the following benefits: motivating and encouraging their child, cutting down on their child's misbehavior in school, and acting as an advocate for the child in the school. Three issues emerged regarding fathers' level of satisfaction with the school: the importance of classroom behavior management, the importance of progress in academic areas, and the importance of the school's climate for children in special education. (Contains 29 references.) (CR)

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Running Head: FATHERS' INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION

Fathers' Involvement In Their Children's Special Education Program

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Abstract

There is a need to gain a better understanding of the unique experiences that fathers face with their children's special education programs. Three factors contribute to this need for further discussion of fathers' involvement in the special education process: 1) fathers have been shown to make unique contributions to the educational progress of their children, 2)fathers' involvement in the formal education of their children has received little attention in the past, and 3) the nature of fathers' involvement in the special education process has not been well understood. The present study seeks to gain a better understanding of the thoughts and concerns that fathers have concerning their involvement in their children's special education programs. Interviews were conducted with nine fathers in order to explore their experiences with their child's special education program. Fathers participating in the current study had children receiving special education services ranging from 5 to 16 years of age. The fathers came from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.

Fathers' Involvement in Their Children's Special Education Program

Family Involvement in Education

Parental involvement with the school has been found to be an important factor in children's success in education (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Mannan & Blackwell, 1992). Schools need to look toward families to help them optimize child development and build student achievement in the schools (Hanson, & Lynch, 1992). Specific needs of families vary due to their diverse backgrounds, but all families need clear, understandable communication from the school about how to assist in their child's educational success.

Parental involvement in their children's education improves student achievement, as well as motivation and self-concept with regard to school performance (Gestwicki, 1987; Grolnick & Ryan, 1992). Parental involvement may also work to increase a child's sense of independence and self regulation, if these qualities are valued and enhanced by the parent (Grolnick & Ryan, 1992). Lastly, students with parents who are more involved in their children's education tend to set higher academic goals for themselves than students whose parents are less involved (Adelman, 1994).

Both parents and schools can also benefit from increased parental involvement. Parental involvement with their children's education can provide parents with specific knowledge concerning their children's educational needs and how to provide for those

needs (Gestwicki, 1987). Teachers and schools can benefit from increased parental involvement through the knowledge parents can provide concerning particular children that might help schools meet these children's educational needs. Parents also can provide teachers with general help and support in accomplishing the school's educational goals (Gestwicki, 1987).

Barriers to Family Involvement

Despite the importance of parent involvement and parents' desire to help their children succeed in school, barriers to a true partnership between schools and families exist. Lack of communication between home and school decreases levels of parental involvement (Cervone & O'Leary, 1982). Some parents may be uncomfortable in the school environment, while others may have work schedules that do not allow them the freedom to attend school functions (Finders & Lewis, 1994; Mannan & Blackwell, 1992). Parents and professionals may also fear criticism from each other. Further, teachers may find that working to involve parents takes a great of effort, yet may not lead to immediately satisfying results (Gestwicki, 1987).

Family Involvement in Special Education

Family involvement is particularly important for children who are receiving special education services. Parental involvement in special education programs has been legally mandated and includes such activities as parents giving informed consent to any special education placement their child receives (Hilton, & Henderson, 1993; IDEA, 1991). However, parental

involvement tends to be under utilized by school professionals in the special education process. For instance, parents' attend committee meeting concerning their child's special education placement, but their actual level of participation is ranked as low (Gilliam, 1979). It seems that many professionals utilize educational planning meetings simply to inform parents of evaluation results rather than to get feedback and information from parents (Turnbull & Turnbull, 1990; Harry, 1992).

Father Involvement

Fathers play an important role in enhancing their children's development, yet have been tended to neglected by school professionals in the past (Meyer, 1986). The limited literature available on fathers' involvement in their children's education tends to be with white, middle class fathers from intact families. Thus, the effects of cultural diversity, socioeconomic background and marital status on fathers' involvement in their children's education is relatively unknown and needs further investigation.

Fathers make unique contributions to their children's social, emotional and intellectual development and their involvement in the schools should be valued (Pitzer & Hessler, 1992; Lamb & Bronson, 1980; Lamb, 1976). Additionally, it has been shown that children with both parents involved in the educational process generally show increased academic motivation and achievement (Biller, 1993). When fathers are involved actively with their children, this frees the mother to pursue

more of her own interests outside of child rearing. Father involvement in the educational process also allows for children to be exposed to a greater variety of educational experiences than if only the mother is actively involved (Biller, 1993).

In general, the role of the father in our society has included increased demands for active involvement in recent years. The increase in society's demands for fathers to be actively involved in child-rearing has dictated that fathers and working mothers now experience similar conflicts between the family and work environments (Pitzer & Hessler, 1992). Fathers have reported that increased time in child-care activities and time spent away from work may decrease their chances for career advancement (Pitzer & Hessler, 1992; Lamb, 1987). Other concerns that fathers seeking high levels of involvement have include questions about what is expected of them as far as communicating with teachers (Johnson & Palm, 1992). Additionally, differences in socioeconomic background have been found to exert an important influence on fathers, contributing more to variations in fathering practices than cultural or ethnic diversity (McAdoo, 1993). Variations in socioeconomic background can affect fathering roles through at least four different avenues (Erickson & Gecas, 1991). First, fathers from middle and lower socioeconomic backgrounds may view their roles quite differently from each other and, thus, may function differently as fathers. For example, fathers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may tend to view themselves more in the role of disciplinarian than

fathers from middle class backgrounds. Second, occupational identity exerts an influence over fathers' functioning in that some jobs are more demanding and require more time away from your family than others (Erickson & Gecas, 1991). Third, fathers' educational level affects their conceptualizations of their role as father. Higher levels of education generally lead to broader definitions of the role of fathers. Thus, fathers from middle socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to participate in a wider variety of activities with their children (such as reading to them or taking them to the library) than fathers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Fourth, income level exerts a direct influence over fathering roles. For example, unemployed fathers tend to have less positive relations with their children than their employed counterparts (Erickson & Gecas, 1991). Additionally, many fathers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may live outside of the home, but may maintain contact with their children (Johnson, 1992). This situation leads fathers to have to deal with unique issues involving their role as fathers. Thus, when seeking to increase father involvement in the educational process, the professional must be sensitive to each father's unique family situation.

Father Involvement in Special Education

The benefits of father involvement for children with special needs have been documented (Vadasy et al, 1985; Meyer, 1986). Programs designed to enhance this involvement may provide fathers both with information regarding their children's needs and with a

social support group. Fathers who participated in programs to increase involvement reported less stress with respect to their child's special needs than fathers who had not participated (Vadasy et al, 1985).

Some of the experiences of fathers with children in special education may be similar to that of mothers in this situation. For instance, both fathers and mothers have to deal emotionally with their grief upon finding out that their child has a disability and both often have to juggle work responsibilities with their new, unfamiliar responsibilities in the home (Meyer, 1986). However, fathers tend to be more future-oriented in their concerns about their child, whereas mothers tend to worry more about the day-to-day routines involved in raising a child with special needs (Meyer, 1986).

Fathers of children participating in a variety of special education programs can benefit from programs to increase their level of involvement with their children's educational process. For example, Head Start programs have recently discovered the importance of father involvement in enhancing both social and cognitive development (Levine, 1993). However, fathers may be intimidated at first by approaches from such father involvement programs. It may be best to approach them initially outside of their role as fathers, by simply introducing informal and fun activities. Create opportunities for the fathers of children in a particular special program to get together, and later bring up issues regarding father involvement or father-child interactions.

Fathers should be included when gathering information from parents regarding the effectiveness of a particular special educational program (Levine, 1993).

Purpose of Study

This study is part of a larger study looking at family involvement in children's special education programs. This particular study attempts to gain a better understanding of fathers' involvement in their children's special education programs. The development of an understanding of fathers' involvement in special education is important for the following reasons. First, there is relatively little research-based knowledge concerning the nature of fathers' involvement in their children's formal education. Second, the nature of fathers' involvement in the special education process is even less well understood. Third, children receiving special education services are particularly vulnerable to school failure and resulting blows to their self-esteem, and might uniquely benefit from active father involvement in their educational process. This study hopes to illuminate fathers' particular thoughts and concerns with regard to special education planning and the services their children are receiving.

Methodology

Qualitative methods were used in the design of this study. Interviews were conducted with nine fathers having children attending special education programs in a southeastern urban school district. These fathers all have children ranging in age

from 5 to 16 years (Median Age = 9). The children receive services in a variety of different special education programs (e.g., learning disability, speech/language disability, and hearing impairment). The ages of the fathers ranged from 35 to 50. The sample includes four African-American fathers, four Caucasian fathers and one Hispanic-American father.

This study attempted to employ focus group methodology in its data gathering procedure. This methodology involves a small group of carefully selected participants engaging in a dialogue with one another about a specific topic. Focus groups are recommended to generate a diversity of ideas on a topic during a discussion and to allow for the sharing of information among participants (Stewart, & Shamdasini, 1991; Krueger, 1994). However, due to difficulty in coordinating the schedules of fathers, two of the fathers were interviewed individually. Another interview was conducted with two fathers and a third interview was conducted with five fathers.

At least two members of the research team were originally to act as moderators for each focus group. Having more than one moderator is one method for ensuring accuracy in the data gathering process, since the researchers can then "compare notes" on what occurred during the focus group discussion (Brotherson & Goldstein, 1992). However, during the interviews with a single participant it was thought optimal to have only one moderator.

Families were identified as potential participants in this

study through the schools which their children attend. These schools each were asked to distribute initial contact letters to all of the families of children receiving special education services in their school. These letters explained the purpose of the study to the families and requested their voluntary participation. Family members then mailed back in a reply as to whether they were interested in receiving more information about participating in the project. Those persons expressing interest were then contacted by phone.

Fathers met separately from other family members and were further grouped by ethnic background. This study utilized grand tour questions developed by the research team to be asked in family focus groups as well as some questions developed specifically to ask fathers. This study is interested in the responses of fathers from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds to questions about their experiences in having a child in a special education program. Issues of particular interest to this study are: 1) fathers' satisfaction with their children's special education program, 2) their level of involvement in this program, and 3) any barriers fathers identify to satisfaction and involvement. Fathers were encouraged to share any thoughts or feelings they have concerning the special education process. The moderators asked follow up questions in order to clarify meanings and encourage the elaboration of emerging themes.

Participants in the focus groups were asked for permission

to audiotape the group discussion. After each interview, the audio tape was transcribed and then erased, with codes being used instead of names on the transcriptions to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Field notes were taken, and included both the recording of the actual dialogue and any observations made during each focus group. Field notes were used to offer support to the themes that emerged through the analysis of the transcripts. In addition to field notes, a reflexive journal, including the researchers' thoughts, feelings and reactions concerning her own participation in the research project was kept. The reflexive journal and field notes were used in the triangulation of the data.

Data Analysis

The tapes of the focus groups were first transcribed. The next step in the data analysis consisted of what is known as data reduction (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The researcher independently unitized the data from the tape transcript, which involves breaking the transcript data down into separate themes or topic areas (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1991). Peer debriefing occurred at this point in that themes that had emerged were discussed among fellow researchers. Researchers then compared the themes identified by each and came to a consensus on which themes were present across focus group discussions. Field notes, kept by the researcher during each focus group, and her reflexive journal were utilized to offer support to these emerging themes.

Findings

This paper focuses on three main themes that have emerged in interviews with the nine fathers participating in this project to this point: 1) communication with the school, 2) fathers views about the role of the parent in the educational process, and 3) fathers' level of satisfaction with the school and school practices.

Communication with the Schools

In discussions with fathers the importance of having good communication links between the school and parent consistently emerged. Fathers want teachers' phone numbers and regular contact with teachers concerning their child's progress in school. They have had differing experiences, however, with regard to whether they feel they have had this communication with the teachers and school which they seek. One father, in reporting his positive communication experiences, describes the following conversation with his child's teacher:

> Well, usually when I go to the school, it's mostly like they always tell you about what he's doing that day. They tell me the good and they also tell me the bad.

On the whole, however, fathers felt that they did not receive the communication from the school or the child's teacher that they needed. In general, they stated that it is left up to the parents to communicate with the school rather than the school reaching out to the parents. The fathers also note that the school is often unresponsive to parental suggestions and involvement. One father, in describing his efforts to

communicate his unhappiness with the school's decision not to include the children in special education on a field trip stated that:

> They responded like I was being a little pushy about the issue. They acted like it was something that wasn't too important to talk about.

Fathers want communication from the school concerning what they can do to help their child at home and concerning their child's progress in school. They want regular IEP meetings and teacher conferences. One father specifically stated that he finds it necessary to have quarterly rather that annual IEP meetings in order to monitor his son's progress. Another complained that he has difficulty getting teachers together for meetings, but that when his son is having trouble in school he feels the need to have these meetings. Yet another father asks that, when his son has a behavior problem in school, the teacher "call me that day he do it." This is so the father can address the issue with his son and be involved in solving the problem.

Additionally, fathers called for communication from the school which they can understand. One father specifically was concerned because the nature of his daughter's learning difficulties had never been made clear to him. Another gave an example of unclear communication when the principal of his child's school sent out a newsletter asking parents to help bring up their children's standardized achievement test scores on the Metropolitan Achievement Test - Seventh Edition (MAT7) used by

the school. This father noted that many parents do not know what skills are tested on the MAT7 or how to help their children improve these skills. These fathers seem to second the importance of communication between parents and the school.

Additionally, as a possibly emerging theme related to communication, the importance of communication between individual schools and the district level personnel was noted. One father states:

> If they would talk to the teachers and find out what the teachers need and what they think is important, I think they could have a better learning environment.

Roles of Parents in Schools

In general, fathers see parent involvement as important. They see many benefits to parent involvement and many different ways in which parents, and specifically fathers, can be involved in their child's schooling process. Some benefits of parent involvement listed by the fathers include motivating and encouraging their child, cutting down on their child's misbehavior in school, acting as an advocate for their child in the school and encouraging school reform. One father has been working with his son using flashcards and trying to help him learn his multiplication facts. Another father comments:

> The fact that his father cares that he learns and works with him to learn, that probably meant more to him to motivate him to learn than the flashcards themselves.

In addition to the varied benefits of parent involvement, these fathers also see many different roles that parents can play

in their involvement in the schools. One such role includes participation in meetings (i.e., parent-teacher conferences and PTA meetings, in addition to IEP meetings). Another role includes helping the school to acquire materials and resources by going to local businesses or by paying fees to the school. Yet another role for parental involvement in the schools involves helping the child with learning activities at home and reinforcing what the child is learning in school. One father states that ". . . we try to reinforce what he learns at school."

With regard to variations in the roles fathers and mothers play within the schools, it appears that each family's experience may be different and that the school will have to look at each family individually. Some fathers are very actively involved with the mothers in going to school meetings. In these families, involvement in the school is largely a joint effort where views and responsibilities are shared openly between the parents. In other families one parent (in all but one case, the mother) has taken primary responsibility for the day-to-day dealings with the school. However, even in these families where the mother has most of the responsibility for communicating with the school, the fathers see themselves as having an important role in their children's education. One such father stated "I have a large role." It seems important to recognize the broadened possibilities for father involvement and that, in at least some families, the father will be as involved as the mother in school

activities. One father sums up his views on the nature of father and mother involvement by stating:

> I think the father's role and the mother's traditional role within our society have changed drastically . . . and I think this is spilling over to our schools too, our schools have to change their attitude about hey, you don't need to call Dad as the disciplinarian or ask Mom to bake cookies for PTA.

Level of Satisfaction with the School

Three distinct issues with regard to level of satisfaction with the school emerged: 1) the importance of classroom behavior management, 2) the importance of progress in academic areas, and 3) the importance of the school's climate for children in special education.

Behavior Management. Lack of classroom control and the prevalence of behavior problems in special education classrooms were a major issue with the fathers participating in this study. They have some suggestions to offer in dealing with these behavior problems. One such suggestion is simply to keep children busy and not allow idle time in the classroom. Fathers also suggest that teachers look at new ways of disciplining children, because the old ways such as suspending them or sending them to ISS (In School Suspension) are not working. One father states:

> The teachers in special education need to take charge over the kids because some of

> them got a behavior problem . . . but if they would be more stricter on them and harder on them instead of letting them just rip and run in the class and do anything they want because they're in special education.

Academic Progress. With regard to educational plans, in general fathers feel that children in special education should be allowed to advance academically at their own pace and should not be held back due to preconceived notions concerning their abilities. For instance, the tracking system is seen as bad if it is used for "dumping" children onto a vocational track. One father stated his views concerning tracking to be as follows:

> It shouldn't be a process of rejection, it should be a process of working on a child's strengths and what can be further developed.

Fathers want their children's educational plans to be truly individualized and for their children to be allowed to advance as far as they can in any given area. They want their children to be challenged by their school work and to continuously make progress where they are able. Fathers differ in whether they feel their children are making appropriate progress in their current educational setting and again the experience seems to be individualized.

School Climate. In general, fathers seem to feel that children in special education are not included into the larger school community to the degree that they should be. One father, in describing his son's special education classroom stated:

> They sets them off, I go to visit my son's classroom, they got his classroom down in the basement, around the corner away from

all the other classrooms. That's not right.

Fathers want their children to be integrated into the normal activities of the school. One father expressed anger when describing an incident in which the school was planning a field trip and was not going to include the students in special education. Other fathers lament that funding and resources do not seem to be available to meet their children's special needs. One father stated simply:

> That's the way most school districts are, they are pushing the fast learners, they really are.

Fathers feel that other groups of children are getting a disproportionate amount of the funding and that the needs of their children are being ignored by the larger district.

> Yeah, I mean the squeaky wheel gets the grease so, if you went to a meeting at large . . . and said OK we're going to prioritize our resources for next year, how many of you really do think that special education needs a great deal more allocation of resources than this past year, we'd lose every time.

Fathers are calling on the school district to address their children's needs and not to put them on the "backburner" simply because children in special education represent a minority of children in the school district.

Discussion

The results reported in this paper are preliminary and further interviews and data analysis will be required to see if

these themes hold reliably true and if other themes emerge as important to father involvement in the schooling process. It seems that the increasing involvement of fathers in child rearing activities cited in the literature (Pitzer and Hessler, 1992) is supported by this data. There is a great potential for fathers to take an active role in collaboration with schools and this potential is not yet being fully realized. Fathers view their child's education as important and are willing to help the schools toward their goal of educating all children. However, this data also support fathers' need for clear communication from the school and support in their efforts to be involved in their children's educational process (Johnson & Palm, 1992; Vadasy et al, 1985). This is a challenge to school personnel to reach out to fathers and give them the opportunity and encouragement to participate more actively in their child's education.

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